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ABSTRACT

In order to instill in children the skills which will be basic to their school experience, words implying a process (such as "hemp," "parasite," and "vanilla") may be "researched" by third and fourth graders through the use of a dictionary, an encyclopedia, a supplementary book on the subject, and an interview with an adult. The child makes a drawing illustrating his understanding of the concepts involved and presents a brief report in class, using careful notes and visual objects. The class and teacher then constructively evaluate the report to determine whether the presentation was orally acceptable, informative, and interesting, and whether it showed adequate research. (MF)

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"Researching" with Third- and Fourth Graders

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Mrs. Liston knows her students and how to channel their curiosity in developing skills of lasting value.

SELDOM HAVE I found an activity so rewarding to both student and teacher as "researching." It has a special meaning in our room, as it can in yours, for children everywhere love to draw "surprises" from a hat. For "researching" I select words such as "cashew," "bayberry," "hemp," "latex," "tapioca," "nutria," "vanilla," "parasite," "belfry," "smudgepot," "stanchion," "squab," "okapi"—words that usually involve a process—and write them on small pieces of paper which are then folded and jumbled into a hat or a box. Each child draws out one paper, and whatever is written on it becomes his research project for the next three or four days (about the limit of his attention span for detailed research).

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He first makes his own private reference cards, by cutting sheets of his familiar notebook paper in half the short way, and then is ready for his first reference. He must look up his word in any one of our several different dictionaries, copy down its meaning exactly, and then document his information by copying, at the bottom of the card, the name, publisher, and date of the source. Next, the student looks up his special project in two different encyclopedias and writes on one card the assimilated information and ideas gleaned from both sources; by using two encyclopedias, the child is guided into copying the idea rather than the direct wording. Again he writes down the name, publisher, and date of each informative source. (Surprisingly often, children in the third and fourth grades still do not know the difference between an encyclopedia and a dictionary, but using both together helps them differentiate between the two.)

Still another book is to be used, any book that mentions or tells about his research subject. This requirement leads him to the subject index of the card catalogue in the school library, and consequently he learns to locate and gather information in places other

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than the usual reference books. All these data he documents on his next reference card.

Because it is important for children to learn that information can and very often does come from people, each student must talk to an adult—someone at home or perhaps a librarian—about his subject and must glean additional ideas and information, which he again writes on another data card and documents as to who said it and on what date. In addition to writing all of his cards, the child does a large drawing of some phase of his project to illustrate it more clearly (and to show the teacher whether or not he has a clear, graphic understanding of his project).

Finally we schedule the oral reports for each child and bring each project to an exciting climax. All kinds of boxes, paper bags, even unusual smells invade our classroom that day, and the children can hardly wait their turns to share the findings of their research with one another. After writing his "researching" word on the board for all to see, each speaks from his note cards to tell (and show) what he has learned from his research. Sometimes it involves only an illustration, drawn earlier. Sometimes it is a whiff of lavender or a sample of cornbread the child has made. Perhaps everyone gets to handle a vanilla bean or to see some real gears. One little girl whose topic was "applique" brought in a quilt her great-grandmother had made which illustrated the applique technique; needless to say, the child more fully appreciated what she had researched. Because he must keep his report short, the student learns to keep to the point.

Upon completion of each oral report, the class and the teacher evaluate it using four simple but revealing criteria (previously written on the board):

1. Did he speak loudly and clearly enough for all to hear?
   —Or did he look down and mumble?
2. Do you feel he really researched his subject?
   —Or did he bluff his way along using lots of words and not many ideas?
3. Did I learn anything from this person's talk?
   —If so, what? If not, why not?
4. Did he tell about his subject in an interesting way?

No grades are written or given in this evaluation; it is all done in a conversational tone, from a constructive point of view, and with the

clear understanding that everybody is trying to help and encourage the other person. It is sufficient evaluation; the next report a child gives nearly always has greatly improved over his previous one. The children are very hard on one another, but not only has the quality of their work improved but also their value judgments have become more accurate and refined each time one of them gives a report.

Beyond giving children an opportunity to do something interesting with information they have gathered, "researching" develops skills they will need throughout their experiences in school whether they will be tackling a broad social studies assignment on a geographic area, discovering in science class how the scientific method works, or gaining in creative arts a better understanding of man's cultural heritage through systematic investigation and evaluation. It is in the English Department, though, that success in these skills should be born. It is in English activities that children can be given the desire and the know-how to be successful in locating, organizing and interpreting ideas. "Researching" is one way I find to help children learn those skills that will last them a lifetime.

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